

Fukushima boss Masao Yoshida breaks silence on disaster

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Masao Yoshida, former boss of the Fukushima power plant in Japan, gives a video account of his experiences during the disaster. Picture: Bunya Source: Supplied

THE boss of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant at the time of the disaster has told of how he and his workers felt they would die as they heard debris from one of three explosions clatter on to the roof of their quake-proof concrete bunker.

Masao Yoshida, the former manager of the plant, broke a 17-month silence today with a video message describing his experiences wrestling to control the stricken plant amid soaring radiation levels in March 2011.

Mr Yoshida, who is in hospital suffering cancer of the esophagus, said the efforts of the workers who remained on site throughout - dubbed the Fukushima 50 - prevented a far more serious disaster.

The accident was second only to the 1986 Chernobyl disaster in terms of radiation released and Japan is still grappling with the fallout from the tragedy with up to 100,000 people still unable to return to their homes.

"It was clear from the beginning that we couldn't run," Mr Yoshida said in the interview, which was screened at publisher Bunya's Bunya-za conference in Fukushima today.

"Reactors five and six would have also melted down without people staying on site.

"My colleagues went out there again and again. The level of radiation on the ground was terrible, yet they gave everything that they had."

Mr Yoshida said he and his workers were immediately aware of the mortal risks they faced in battling the overheating reactors after the magnitude-9 quake and subsequent tsunami smashed the plant and knocked out cooling systems.

His fears grew in the hours and days after as ashen-faced workers periodically returned to the seismic isolation room with horrific stories of the damage outside.

Mr Yoshida said he feared for his life on three occasions in the days after the accident as huge explosions

ripped the roof off reactors one and three as the plant spewed radioactive isotopes into the air and the ocean.

"At the time we didn't know they were hydrogen explosions," he said. "When that first explosion occurred, I really felt we might die."

The explosions were caused by the ignition of hydrogen released from the water being injected into the reactors. Although they severely damaged the reactor buildings and hampered relief efforts, they didn't rupture any of the containment vessels around the nuclear fuel.

Mr Yoshida said he thought at least 10 of his workers had been killed in the first explosion and was stunned to find out that all escaped with their lives, although several workers and army personnel were injured.

"I felt awful for those injured, but I felt like Buddha was watching over us."

Mr Yoshida, a devout Buddhist, said the efforts of his colleagues reminded him of that religion's Lotus Sutra, which describes Buddhist saints emerging from out of the earth.

"Pushing their physical limits they would go out and risk their lives, come back in, then go out to do it again," he said.

"It's only because of them that we have been able to get things under control to the extent we have now."

At the time of the accident on March 11, Mr Yoshida, a veteran employee of plant operator TEPCO, was on his fourth stint at Fukushima Daiichi and knew everyone on site by name and had earned their trust.

He recalled in the interview often passing out cigarettes to workers in a heavily used smoking room beside the bunker during the disaster and once joked: "We don't have the US army fire trucks we need but at least we have got smokes."

At one point, Mr Yoshida encouraged colleagues in the room to write their names on the whiteboard as a memorial in case they were all killed. One worker said he felt like he was writing on his own headstone.

"I probably wanted to record all the names of those who were there fighting to the end," Mr Yoshida said.

The former plant boss - who hopes to overcome his cancer and return to a role helping overcome the damage of the disaster - sought to refute any suggestion that he or anyone at the plant had raised evacuating.

"I never said to headquarters anything about pulling people out - it never occurred to me," he said.

"Our main concern was to find a way to stabilise the plant. There was no way we were going to leave the plant. There was no way we were going to pull people out who were on the ground."

Former prime minister Naoto Kan, who was in office during the disaster, said TEPCO management told him it was preparing to pull out and abandon the plant and was only stopped by his intervention.

Mr Yoshida made no comment on whether TEPCO headquarters had considered withdrawing the workers in the interview.

The former plant boss is viewed among some Japanese as a hero for refusing orders from above to cease the injection of seawater into one of the stricken reactors.

Experts say this single act prevented the disaster from becoming much more serious. Video shot inside the TEPCO concrete command bunker and recently released by the company show that Mr Yoshida also raised leading a suicide squad comprised of himself and elderly workers to mount a death mission to restore cooling if the situation worsened.

However, the interview did not touch on either of these points.

Mr Yoshida did use the opportunity, though, to call for foreign expertise to be brought in to help stabilize the reactors, something experts claim TEPCO and Japanese authorities have been reluctant to do on a meaningful level.

"People won't come back to Fukushima until the plant is stabilised and we still need to find a way to do that," he said. "We have to bring people in from around the world. It will require people, technology and wisdom from all corners."

The reactors at the plant - which sits on the Pacific Ocean 250km north of Tokyo - are in a state of cold

shutdown in which ongoing nuclear reactions have ceased, but thanks to a jerry-rigged cooling system and structural weaknesses at the plant the site remains vulnerable to another quake or tsunami.

While the government of Japan has declared the cold shutdown and is anxious to talk up progress at the site, Mr Yoshida spoke in his interview as if he didn't consider the reactors stabilised.

He said he had remained silent until now because he felt it was not right to speak while the four investigations into the tragedy - now concluded - were still under way.

Mr Yoshida said he and the other workers told everything to investigators and the findings reflected this, but their human stories didn't come through in the investigatory reports.

He said he agreed to the interview with Hideki Yabuhara - who has conducted extensive counselling of workers on the site since October 2011 - to remedy this.

"I felt we have to find ways to get our message across ourselves. We have to find ways to properly tell our experiences," he said.

Mr Yabuhara, who promotes a kind of counselling or "active listening" that he calls wamon, said TEPCO employees were victims themselves, but were also seen as bad guys due to the disgrace the company finds itself in.

He said workers were not able to wear their company jackets outside the plant and planned marriages of some employees had been called off because of the stigma attached to the company.